

An
Inaugural Essay,
on
Dropsy.

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A preternatural collection of ~~serous~~ or watery fluid in any part or cavity of the body is called a dropsy. Although the disease may here particular names to distinguish it according as it is situated: viz Anasarca when in the cellular membrane, Ascites when in the Abdomen,

● Hydrothorax when in ^{the} Chest, &c yet the disease is actually the same, depending upon the same general causes & cured by the same remedies with but little or no variation.

In correct language dropsy, or the mere deposition of water can hardly be called a disease; it is more properly the effect of some wrong, or morbid action, already in the system.

● Causes of Dropsy. To every one who is in the smallest degree acquainted with Physiology it is perfectly well known that in the healthy state of the system a serous exudation or secretion is constantly taking place from the exhalents, into every cavity or interstice of the body,

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capable of receiving it; and that it is soon
taken up by the absorbent vessels, and again
conveyed into the circulation, in a manner which
it is not necessary to explain at present. From
a knowledge of this fact in the animal economy
it will be evident, that a dropsy must be the
consequence if such an effusion be suffered to
accumulate, either from an unusual quantity
being thrown out by the exhalents, or from a
diminution or interruption of power in the absor-
bents. From this it appears, that dropsy is
nothing more than the effect, of a destruction
of the natural balance, existing between the
exhalents & absorbent vessels. That dropsy is the
effect of this destruction, will not be denied;
but a question may arise, whether the exhalents
or the absorbents are most frequently in fault.
Here I believe, the generality of practitioners concur
in the opinion, that the increase of effusion or
secretion, is by far the most frequent cause;

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but that it may occasionally arise also from a want of power or interruption in the action of the absorbents is equally true, though this is not a frequent cause of this disease. The increase of effusion may arise from whatever affords an obstruction to the free return of blood to the heart; either from disease of the blood vessels themselves or of the heart, as ossification, aneurism, polypus &c or from pressure on the blood vessels from other causes, as pregnancy, tumours, ascites, & hypertrophies of the abdominal viscera & more particularly of the liver. It might not be improper here to remark that Dr Cullen does not consider obstruction in any of the abdominal viscera except the liver, as causes of dropsy. That the above causes may impede the circulation & by that means increase the action of the exhalents is very evident; but on the other hand when dropsy depends upon a want of absorption, the cause of this deficiency is not manifest.

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but from ^{the} some remedies being beneficial which act on
the principle of stimulating the part as for example
friction; may we not infer it to be arising to debility
of the vessels of that part. Dropsy may also arise
from mere debility, or what has been called a
Hydropic Diathesis, In this case the absorbents certainly
are in fault. Intemperance, Indolence, large evacua-
tion of blood, sudden suppression of accustomed
evacuation &c are mentioned also as causes of dropsy.
Although it may & does frequently arise from the
preceding causes, yet it is more frequently the effect
of other diseases, as Gout, Asthma, Angina
Pectoris, Scarlet Fever, Erysipelas, Diarrhoea
Gyenteria, Jaundice, &c and more especially
from protracted Intermittent Fever. Having thus
enumerated the seats & causes of dropsy,
I shall proceed on relating the symptoms, not
thinking it necessary to mention all the symptoms
attendant on the various forms of dropsy,
I shall confine myself in the following observation

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to that species of it called Anasarca.

Anasarca commences with a swelling of the lower extremities, which at first appears only, in the evening, in the morning disappearing, the swelling is inelastic, pitting under the finger which slowly fills up again, the swelling which was at first confined to the ankles, gradually extends upwards to the thighs, trunk of the body, & even to the head & face, which appears puffed up, the skin is sometimes greatly distended, fluid escapes out, or being too viscid or gross to pass through the pores of the cuticle, pushes it up in the form of little blisters, the skin is also dry, & glossy, pale smooth. The urine is diminished in quantity, there is great thirst, generally, castreness, sallowness of countenance and emaciation, to these succeed stupor, heaviness and a slow fever. This form of dropsy very frequently precedes some of the other forms, & not unfrequently in the advanced stage several of them are present at

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The same time our prognosis in this disease
will generally be favourable, when the urine
is increased in quantity, when there is much
moisture on the surface of the body, when
there is not much debility, or emaciation,
when there is a diminution of thirst, & especially
when there is no visceral obstruction but great
emaciation drawings, organic affection, dry
skin, great thirst febrile heat, quick & feeble
pulse, with hæmorrhages, Petechia &c are to
be regarded as very unfavourable symptoms.

Having thus considered the causes, seats, & symptoms
of dropsy. I must proceed to the consideration of
the cure. To this end all our views & opinions
tend; but were I convinced in the accuracy
of the statement, generally given by European
practitioners respecting the cure of this disease,
I should enter upon it with no flattering hopes
of success, there is however, perhaps no disease
to which the maxim of the venerable Rust is

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more applicable than they present which is "to
attack diseases in their forming state and eradicate
them before they are deeply rooted in the system,"
and to the neglect of this practice & principally
impute their want of success: a small evacuation
of blood, or a slight purge will do more towards
curing dropsy in the early stage, than the most
powerful medicines we can employ at a more
advanced period: thousands recover when thus
treated, but few, very few ~~when~~ the disease is
suffered to fasten itself upon the system.

In the commencement of the cure of dropsy, we
must in the first place remove if possible the cause
of the disease; if it is obstruction to the circulation
from tumours, we must call in the aid of
the surgeon; If it be general debility, we
must restore tone to the system; If the patient
is addicted to intemperance, he must forsake
the inebriating draught; If he is indolent
or inactive, we must arouse him to enterprises

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exertions, if it is caused by large evacuation of
blood, these must be suppressed, or if from the sup-
-pression of accustomed discharges, we must restore
these again to the system. But unfortunately,
the causes may either be lost from us entirely,
or be of such a nature as to prevent our attacking
it directly with remedies, hence the cure is difficult
& tedious, nevertheless we must not abandon
our patient & remain inactive, but resort to the
means we possess of evacuating the effused
fluid, being guided in some measures by that
polar star of the system the pulse. The remedies
we are in possession of for the accomplishment
of the purpose just mentioned are 1st Bleeding.
2nd Emetics. 3rd Purgings 4th Diuretics 5th Diapho-
retics 6th Sudorifics 7th Friction 8th Punctures
That of blood letting is highly useful & essential,
in most cases of dropsy is confirmed by the
experience of all physicians of the present age
(especially, though America.)

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In dropsy generally the pulse is tense & corded,
or in an oppressed state, the surface is dry, the tongue
 parched, and the blood when drawn exhibits
the buffy coats, all marks denoting arterial action,
which in this as in most other cases must be
reduced before any other remedy can be prescribed
with utility, & sometimes even before they will
operate at all. Although venesection is not so
frequently called for in anasarca as in some
other form, yet generally the affection is of an
inflammatory nature, & calls loudly for the
Lancet. Indeed in some forms of dropsy, &
especially in that called hydrops, from the
authority of D^r Chapman I am led to conclude,
that venesection is as necessary to the previous
use of other medicine, as emetics & purges to the
administration of bark in Intermittant fevers
Emetics spontaneous vomiting being occasionally
effective in curing dropsy, practitioners were
naturally led to infer their utility when artificially

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excited. That they have been beneficial when thus
excited might be easily proved, but their use appears
to be principally confined to cases where the stomach
is loaded with offensive matter. At the present
time they are a remedy of no great reputation but
have given way to other more certain means & especially
to Purgings. The use of purging in dropsy is of no
modern date it was employed by Sydenham & frequent-
ly repeated. By almost all practitioners, the drastic
lins such as Gamboge, Scammony, Colocynth, &c were selected
as being most efficacious this however is not true in
all cases. They appear to be more especially appli-
cable to old dropsies attended with a torpid condition
of the alimentary canal, but in recent cases
and where there is much febrile heat present we
find the saline cathartics much more prefera-
ble, of these the Super Saturated of Potash stands
prominent in point of utility & to be beneficial
however as a cathartic it must be so given so
as to prevent its diuretic effects, & for this purpose

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It is recommended in the form electuary. But uniting with the cream of Tartar, Jalap, we are led to believe from the authority of Dr. Chapman that its virtues are greatly increased. In this way he has found it one of the most officinal remedies he ever used, being (to use his own words) "both prompt & astonishing in its effects." The manner of giving it is in the quantity of ʒij or ʒiij of the former and x or xv grs of the latter frequently repeated so as to keep up a continual discharge. The water still remaining we must in the next place resort to those remedies which act more particularly on the lymphatic system; Saline & Diuretics. As a diuretic in dropsy, the cream tartar is eminently & deservedly celebrated, it is even thought superior to Digitalis, when properly given. Speedily emits copious diuresis. It may be given in the quantity of ʒi in a quart of water through the course of the day, & in this way it operates as a diuretic only.

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but Dr. Chapman recommends it in the form of an electuary; when he says it produces both copious discharges of urine, & abundant evacuation.

The nitell of polack was once a remedy of no small reputation, but is now in great measure superseded by more powerfull means, a frequent cause however of its failure I believe is owing to its being given in too minute doses, but an objection to large doses is that it is extremely apt to nauseate the patient. The common Parsley Dr. Chapman speaks highly of as being effectual in dropsy.

It may be given in infusion, all parts of it & especially the roots. Among all our remedies for the evacuation of water in dropsy, none is perhaps entitled to more respect than Digitalis. The credit is due to Withering of first having introduced it for this disease, whose sentiments respecting it are decidedly in favour of its superiority to every other article, Indeed he says so far as the cure depends upon the evacuation of water, so far it may be

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may be depended upon. Notwithstanding the high regard in which this article stands as a diuretic in dropsy, among many very eminent practitioners, yet there are not wanting those ^{who} deny its utility altogether, but this I imagine is owing in a great measure to prejudice, or ignorance of the state to which it is applicable, for as long as there remains the least excitement in the pulse, the remedy will not only be inefficacious, but pernicious. first reduce arterial action & then it will be productive of the happiest effects, proving almost as certainly diuretic, as Tartarised Stomach or Spasmodic proves Emetic. It may be given in powder or tincture, and I believe Dr Chapman recommends it in the former way, as being less dangerous. Although the above opinion which I have advanced respecting the state to which the digitalis is applicable is the one contended for ⁱⁿ this School, yet it is contended by a respectable Professor of a neighbouring university, that it is only applicable where the least is indicated.

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It for which it answers as a substitute, but at the same time
he is averse to its use, saying its name "digitus,
indicates its effects, it points to the grave."

Similar to the preceding, in some respects is the
Tabacco; but it is at once both a disagreeable and
dangerous medicine & is not generally employed.

The Serpentine is a remedy of some utility as a diuretic
when given in the dose of X or XV grs twice or thrice
per day, in a larger dose it operates as a purge. The
sonchus or Rattlesnake root is a remedy that once
enjoyed considerable reputation, but it has of late
lost much of its celebrity and by most practitioners
is not much employed. Dr. Chapman however recom-
mends it considerably & says its virtues are much
increased by the addition of a small portion of
calomel as Pulv. Sonchus X or XV grs. calomel ss gr. Moxo.
Tincture of cantharides. This article if rightly adminis-
tered, will prove highly beneficial especially in
the weaker forms of dropsy; when given in small
doses it produces irritation of the bladder & strong urine

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but when given in the quantity of ʒiij or ʒiij through
the day, it will prove powerfully diuretic evacuating
large quantities of water. The last article I shall
mention as a diuretic is the Squill.

This is decidedly the most certain & efficacious
article we possess of a diuretic. In general I believe
it is given in too small doses, I have known the
water of universal dropsy completely evacuated in
the course of a few days, by the patient taking large
quantities of the infusion, when given alone, this I
consider the best way of using it, but its virtues
may be greatly increased when given in powder
by adding Calomel, to it & sometimes a little nitrate
of Potash.

Diaphoretics are medicines which once were of
great repute in the cure of dropsy, much of which
however is now lost; nevertheless they are useful
especially in dropsies brought on by Intermittent
Fever, and where the skin is parched & dry.
Of the external means. vapour bath is perhaps

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The most preferable. Of the internal remedies, opium especially, in the form of Dover's powder is highly useful. The swelling still continuing and the strength of the patient not forbidding; especially in dropsy, from visceral obstruction we may sometimes experience much benefit from the use of mercury, urged to a salivation; and indeed we would naturally be led to expect such effects from the great power of this article over the absorbent system. Local Means. Friction with the haquet, flesh brush, or with flannel are sometimes useful, but should not be trusted in to the exclusion of other more certain means. The skin still remaining distended by the presence of water, we may puncture it with a lancet, guarding however that they be small, distant from each other, and not in the most depending part of the body, as gangrenes may sometimes arise from them. If this however should unfortunately occur either from the cause above, distention or from the injudicious application of blisters, the best remedy is the application of a flannel roller to the limb. The remedy in the Authority of Dr. Chapman is of great utility.

